

Karen Hesse on Writing



"The thing about writing... until your words become a book you can change them, mold them, shape and reshape them until they look and sound and feel precisely the way you want."

—Karen Hesse, excerpt from *Something About the Author*

Karen Hesse likes routine. She likes it so much that she wakes up at the same time every day—5:00 A.M.! During the week, she heads for her computer to work on her latest book. On the weekends, she answers the mail she receives from her readers around the world.

Even though Hesse tries to write every day, she has admitted that some days are easier than others: "There are times that writing goes so well I feel I have been given a gift. Then there are times it goes so slowly, it feels like torture. But I know that if I stay at the computer—if I keep at it with every word and every image—it will be okay."

Hesse gets the ideas for her books from many sources. Some of her writing is drawn from her own experiences. Her book *Lavender* is based on her relationship with her favorite aunt.

Sometimes, she simply chooses topics that grab her attention.

What's Hesse's secret for writing one great book after another? "I never do anything in halves," she explains. That means careful research and lots of revising. Although Hesse's research always begins at her local library, it has led her to some unusual places. For example, she spent time at a dolphin research facility in Florida while working on *The Music of Dolphins*.

When Hesse sits down to write her books, she doesn't always get it right the first time. "Writing is not easy," she has explained. "I work for long hours and sometimes that work disappoints me and I throw it out and begin again." Hesse won't give up until she has it perfect. She started her book *Letters from Rifka* twenty times before finally finding the right voice for the main character!

Sometimes Hesse uses photographs when she writes. Look at the photo on the front cover of *Out of the Dust*. It is a famous photograph taken in 1936 by a man named Walker Evans. To Hesse, this photo was her character Billie Jo. She kept it by her computer as she wrote *Out of the Dust*. Hesse has shared, "I often keep a photograph in front of me as I'm writing. I look into the eyes of that person, and in my brain there's a constant checking. 'Would you say this? Would you do this?' It keeps the character focused and real."

What does Hesse tell people who want to be writers? "I say go for it! Anyone who wants to write can. The requisites are to read as much as you can, and to write every day. . . . Use a diary or journal. If you feel that you have something to say, you probably do. Just don't give up."

You Be the Author!



- **Is this the end?:** The last entry in *Out of the Dust* is dated December 1935. What do you think happens to Billie Jo and her family next? Does Daddy ever harvest a good wheat crop? Does Billie Jo perform in another concert? What happens with Mad Dog's singing career? Write a new entry for *Out of the Dust* dated December 1936.
- **Stormy weather:** You may not know what it's like to be in a dust storm, but chances are you've seen some extreme weather. Has your town ever had a blizzard, drought, tornado, ice storm, heat wave, or hurricane? Write a story about your wildest weather experience.
- **The other side of the story:** The entries in *Out of the Dust* are written by Billie Jo. They help you understand what she saw, felt, and did. What about the other people in the book? Did they experience things differently than Billie Jo? Try writing an entry from another character's point of view.
- **Poetry power:** Write a one-page story about a day in your life. Some topics you could choose are your last birthday, a day out with your best friend, a time you played your favorite sport, or a concert you performed in at school. Now try writing the same event as free-verse poetry. Remember, your poetry doesn't have to

rhyme and it doesn't have to follow a pattern. It can be as long or short as you like as long as it describes your day. Compare the two pieces you wrote. How are they alike? How are they different?

- **Can you picture it?:** Find a picture of someone you don't know. Look in a magazine, a newspaper, or ask your parents if you can borrow an old photo. Write a story about the person in the picture.

Activities



- **Sing the blues:** What kind of music did Billie Jo play on her piano? Find out for yourself! Learn one of the songs mentioned in *Out of the Dust*. Choose “My Baby Just Cares for Me” by Gus Kahn and Walter Donaldson or “Bye, Bye, Blackbird” by Ray Henderson and Mort Dixon.

If you love singing the blues, you could also try one of the songs written by Woody Guthrie (1912–1967). Guthrie was a folk musician who was born in Oklahoma—so he knew all about dust. Check out his songs: “Dust Bowl Blues,” “Dust Can’t Kill Me,” or “Blowin’ Down This Road (I Ain’t Going To Be Treated This Way).” One place you can find these recordings is on Woody Guthrie’s CD titled *Dust Bowl Ballads*. Ask for it at your local library or music store.

- **Dear Mr. President:** Billie Jo was very fond of President Franklin Delano Roosevelt. She even named her baby brother after him. What do you think of the current president? Is he doing a good job? Is there something you’d like him to do to make the United States a better place? Let him know. You can e-mail the president at president@whitehouse.gov. You can also send a letter via snail mail. Address your letter to

The White House
1600 Pennsylvania Avenue N.W.
Washington, D.C. 20500

Be sure to include your age in your letter. You might also include your return address so the president can write back!

• **Bake an apple pandowdy:** Billie Jo loves apples, and she knows that one delicious way to enjoy them is a deep-dish dessert called apple pandowdy. If you'd like to try apple pandowdy for yourself, follow the recipe below. Be sure to have an adult assist you.

Ingredients

2 tablespoons butter
1/3 cup shortening (such as Crisco™)
1 1/2 cups brown sugar
1/2 cup flour
1/2 teaspoon salt
1 cup water
4 teaspoons cinnamon
5 large apples
1 teaspoon vanilla extract
1 tablespoon cream or milk

Directions

Step one

Preheat oven to 375 degrees.

Step two

In a medium-size saucepan combine: 1 cup brown sugar, 1/4 cup flour, 1/2 teaspoon salt, 1 cup water, and 1 teaspoon cinnamon. Place over low heat and stir periodically with a wooden spoon until the mixture thickens (this takes about 10 to 15 minutes).

Remove from heat and add 2 teaspoons cinnamon, 2 tablespoons butter, and 1 teaspoon vanilla extract. Stir together. Cover and set aside.

Step three

Peel the skin off of the five apples. Slice the apples and discard the cores. Place the sliced apples into a greased 9-inch-square baking dish.

Step four

Using a potato masher or fork, combine $\frac{1}{3}$ cup shortening, $\frac{1}{4}$ cup flour, $\frac{1}{2}$ cup brown sugar, and 1 teaspoon cinnamon in a medium-size bowl. Mash the ingredients together until they look like lumpy oatmeal. Mix in 1 tablespoon cream or milk.

Step five

Pour the mixture from step two on top of the apples. Spoon the mixture from step four on top of the apples, trying to spread the mixture evenly over the apples. Bake at 375 degrees for 30 minutes. With an adult's help, remove from oven, let cool, and serve with vanilla ice cream.

- **Keep a journal:** Remember the events in your life by keeping a journal like Billie Jo did. Think about what details someone might find interesting seventy-five or one hundred years from now. What is going on in the news? Who is president? What is your home like? What kind of clothing do you wear? What music do you listen to? What activities are you involved in? Don't forget to put the date before each entry.

- **Get the real story:** If you'd like to find out more about life during the Depression, ask an older relative or neighbor if you can interview them about their experiences during the 1930s. Be sure to bring a pen and paper, a laptop, or a tape recorder so you can record what is said. Before you do your interview, think of what questions you'd like to ask. Some possibilities include: How old were you during the Depression? Where did you live? How did your family earn money during the Depression? What did you think of President Franklin Roosevelt? Did you ever experience a dust storm? Do you remember hearing about the dust storms? Make sure to thank the person you interview.

- **Map it!:** The places discussed in *Out of the Dust* are real. Try finding the following sites on a map of Oklahoma: Keyes, Guymon, Texhoma, Goodwell, Felt, Cimarron River, Beaver River, Black Mesa.

- **Dig up the past:** Billie Jo talks about the dinosaur bones that were found near her home. Cimarron County, Oklahoma, was a very popular spot for dinosaurs that lived millions of years ago. Dinosaurs loved the hot, humid weather, the beach, and the cypress trees that existed in Cimarron County in prehistoric times.

Oklahoma isn't the only place dinosaurs roamed. Dinosaurs lived throughout North America. A few probably even lived in your neighborhood. If you do a little research, you can discover which prehistoric creatures called your town home. One place to start is the Discovery Channel's Web site. Go to: <http://dsc.discovery.com/convergence/dinos/lookup.html>. Just type in your zip code to find the names of the dinosaurs that lived near you.